

Day Thirty-Six

27 November 1952

Where the Crane School road plunges off Briery Mountain to the Brandonville Turnpike at the Tannery Bridge, Roaring Creek pours out of the upper Gap, a deep slash it cut in the mountain eons ago, and flows northwest in chattering white water parallel with the Turnpike. In 1938 Kay and I hiked along the Turnpike—up and down and back for fourteen miles when it was a sandy summer dirt road. The mountain and Roaring Creek haven't changed, only the paved surface; the side roads are the incredible same, even now.

On Thanksgiving Day 1952, just five years to the very date after Ruff's first retrieve in the nearby Gold Mine Rocks, Kay and Ruff and I were rock-hopping the Country Squire station wagon in bone-jarring bumps down the washed-out Crane School road. White streaks in the ghastly rocks of the road showed where somebody's differential had struck fire like flint on a frizzen or scraped running boards or bumped fenders on the sides.

The road couldn't have been much worse when the old log Stanton house stood partway up the mountain. One night John Feather told the tale beside a fox hunters' campfire.

"Stanton got bit by a 'coon and caught hydrophobia. He locked a chain 'round his neck and nailed the other end to a log in the outside house wall so's he couldn't give hydrophobia to other people. There he lived, chained outside in all kinds of weather like a dog. If anyone came near him he'd growl and say, 'Stay away from me, I might bite you.' The next spring he died and they cut him down and buried him back of the house."

The old Stanton log house, a small black dot on a top map now, is gone, and so is John Feather and his stories.

Halfway down the awful hill I pulled to a grinding skidding

stop near grapevines that looked too good to pass up. We had been hunting in fair cover on top, but nothing as promising as this. Arranging with Kay to take the station wagon and meet me at the bottom, I opened the tailgate and Ruff slid out as smoothly as if he had no bones. As I closed it, two grouse flushed from the steep hillside and went for the top of the mountain.

By the time I pulled my gun from its scabbard sleeve and had dropped in two shells, Ruff was on point above me, spread out like a spider on its web, trying not to roll down the hill. He was in tall pole timber with open leaf-covered forest floor dotted with a few small hemlocks. I almost made it up to him as two more grouse went in the air simultaneously and sailed down the mountainside, one crossing over the Turnpike, the other disappearing in hemlocks along Roaring Creek far below, my mental retina retaining the vision of black-barred flank feathers.

Kay was waiting for me in the station wagon at the Tannery Bridge and we decided to follow the bird that had gone to the stream.

There was almost no bank on the right side of Roaring Creek at this place, only a flat area of creek pebbles where high water had swept away the soil, leaving an intermittent fringe of rhododendron, which Ruff was searching industriously.

Scrambling over smooth stones that rolled under my boots, I found Ruff on solid point in a dense green clump of rhododendron at the stream's edge. When I circled in front of him nothing happened, and I pushed into the green foliage and waited, with no reaction. There was a sapling beside me with a single strand of grapevine hanging from its top and intertwined among the rhododendron at the bottom. Grasping my gun vertically in my right hand with the butt resting on my pelvis, I reached up with my left and tugged the grapevine like a bellpull. It brought service. The grouse shot out from under Ruff's nose and was over the water before I saw it, a low dark streak zooming downstream.

We crossed to the left side of Roaring Creek with Kay taking the tramroad grade, which was clearly evident there, and Ruff and I worked the cover on the upper side where I guessed the grouse had gone. It flushed wild this time from the tramroad edge in front of Kay, and kept going straight down Roaring Creek.

We were a long distance from the original flush on the mountainside and I expected the grouse to make a try to come back upstream on its next rise, which would be its fourth. At the junction with the little tributary from the left, which we had hunted this morning at its crossing high on the Crane School road, I was sure the bird would be nearby.

Ruff plunged into Roaring Creek in front of me and stopped, rigid on point in the middle of the stream, facing a wall of rhododendron eight feet high on the far bank. He was standing in turbulent water below a small waterfall, his head reaching high, his left paw raised tight against his chest, exactly as Briar pointed years after him and as Quest points now, and his soul was in his face. I will never forget his eyes.

I splashed over the slippery stream bed and stopped just downstream from him, breathing hard from the tension of the moment, staring at the mass of rhododendron and trying to cover the corridor of the stream in both directions. Kay was coming out into the water with her camera, and I waited for her to get the picture, knowing this grouse had been unpredictable so far with one tight lie and two quick-triggered flushes. Ruff was immobile except to roll his eyes and turn his head once while Kay focused her camera, and I could see his liver-colored nose twist first right, then left, as he tried to pinpoint the thread of scent. I was getting edgy, waiting for the sound of the shutter being tripped, and then Kay whispered that she had already got the picture.

The water of the current was icy against my boots as I took a step toward the bank, and at my movement Ruff turned his body downstream, then froze again, headed into the rhododendron. At times like this, every nerve, every perception is stretched to concert pitch and rising to the breaking limit. I could smell the rhododendron foliage that normally has no fragrance, with the temperature of the sand, the black earth, and the damp air from the water radiating to my face. Rhododendron is unlike any growth any man has tried to penetrate—a tough interweave of springy branches that resist attack. I saw one place less dense and inserted my gun barrels horizontally in front of me and pushed in, forcing my shoulders and body like a wedge. Stems and long green leaves like some sort of tropical plant stung my face as I fought through, head down,

knowing I was blowing my chance for a shot by going in but determined to flush the grouse to consummate Ruff's point. All the while he stood somewhere behind me and never moved. The bank was steeper than I had estimated and I had to crawl up on my knees, feeling the wet sand through my pants, trying to keep my gun barrels in front of me. I was through the thickest growth at the water's edge and was on a sandy shelf in an opening like a small cave of foliage. I crouched there, the only sound the one-two, one-two of my labored breathing, then abandoning caution I stood up. The grouse detonated within feet of me, boring straight up into a small piece of sky where my gun barrels found it and I fired, blasting the quiet of the valley. The grouse hung for a second, spinning, then dropped vertically back the way it had gone up, falling on Ruff who must have pushed in at the shot. For a wild moment he and the grouse rolled down the bank, one on top, then the other, until Ruff got his footing and pinned the bird under his paw and caught it.

How Kay got through that tangle I never found out, but she was beside me in time to see Ruff's retrieve, putting the ultimate glow on the ceremony of the kill. The grouse was not as large as I had thought—an adult if rounded primary tips mean anything as to age; a hen by the unmistakable burnt-orange upper breast marking and the black breast bars. I was experiencing the feedback of remorse as I held the lovely thing in my palm, warm, so game, so dead. I had to live with it, unless I renounced grouse gunning; this had been as sporting as any shooting could be, and I accepted my sin as part of me, and responded to Ruff's impatience to be off and hunting, the way my setters have always tempered my guilt neurosis with common sense. It had been a grand piece of action with superb dog work—three productive points on four consecutive flushes by the same grouse, with one shot that counted, and a stunning capture and retrieve.

As we drove back the Turnpike, a grouse flushed from near the Blue Ribbon Pour-Out and crossed in front to land in the top of a tall bare tree. I stopped the station wagon and we watched it, with Ruff whining, until it took off toward Roaring Creek. Approaching Lenox, we stopped again as the sun broke through and illuminated the contours of Briery Mountain, a reflection of our joy in being alive. It was Thanksgiving.